

SELLON, CHARLES J.

DRAWER 10C

CONTEMPORARIES

71.2009.085.03283

Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Charles J. Sellon

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Until more is known about Kelley's constituent, the precise identification of the medal will remain in doubt. However, some modest conclusions can be drawn at this point. Both of the medals described above reveal Pennsylvania's obsession with the tariff, a preoccupation which Abraham Lincoln understood very well. In January of 1861, when President-elect Lincoln decided to offer the position as Secretary of the Treasury to Ohio's Salmon P. Chase rather than Pennsylvania's Simon Cameron, he explained to a political confidante, "But then comes the danger that the protectionists of Pennsylvania will be dissatisfied." Only the medals from Pennsylvania (and one the source of which is unknown) stress "Protection." Others deal with Union or free soil. It seems fitting that "Pig Iron" Kelley should have been midwife to the birth of such campaign materials.

It is instructive, too, to note the primitive state of campaign financing. Kelley was willing to pay out of his own pocket for the production of a photograph to aid the Philadelphia medal-maker. In fact, the nature of campaigning itself was not yet a matter of predictable public-relations techniques. Norman Judd served in the Illinois Senate from 1844 to 1860 and was a political wire-puller of long standing. Lincoln knew Judd's abilities very well, and, when he was having difficulty with excluding Cameron from his cabinet, he had "a great notion to post Judd fully in this matter, and get him to visit Washington, and in his quiet way, try to adjust it satisfactorily." As Chairman of Illinois's Republican State Central Committee and a member of the Republican National Committee from 1856 to 1861, Judd was a politician's politician, a man who surely knew how to run a campaign. Yet even Judd instructed Lincoln to see to the "picture proposition" largely as a favor to Kelley and was just "coming to believe, that likenesses broad cast, are excellent means of electioneering."

Historians are a little like Judd in that they are just coming to realize the significance of a broad range of campaign materials. Medals do have some political content; in 1860, Pennsylvania's campaign medals mentioned protection — others did not. Still, it is the general lack of content in such materials that is revealing. Judd, Lincoln, and Kelley attended to the medal matter in the crush of other important political business. Though historians stress issues in their studies of politicians, the politicians often preferred not to. Issues are divisive. Medals and pictures are not. Politicians ran "hurrah" campaigns, not debates on political science, and the great abundance of "hurrah" campaign ephemera is the best proof of the politicians' preferences.



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 9. William Darrah Kelley.

LINCOLN AUTOGRAPHED DEBATES: A COPY PRESENTED BUT NOT SIGNED

Editor's Note: I am indebted to Grant Talbot Dean of the Chicago Historical Society for informing me of the existence of the book discussed in this article.

The Chicago Historical Society owns an interesting copy of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858, in Illinois* which bears this inscription: "James C. Conkling/Presented by/A Lincoln/April 7 1860." Harry E. Pratt did not list this copy in "Lincoln Autographed Debates," *Manuscripts*, VI (Summer, 1954).

James Cook Conkling (1816-1899) was a likely recipient of a free copy of Lincoln's book. Born in New York City, Conkling graduated from Princeton and settled in Springfield in 1838. Politics, profession, and matrimony soon forged a Lincoln-Conkling friendship. Conkling was, like Lincoln, a lawyer and a Whig in politics. In 1841, he married Mercy Ann Levering, the "Dearest Merce" of Mary Todd (Lincoln's) earliest known letters. In fact, Conkling's letters provide one of the more important sources for the Todd-Lincoln courtship, the gay social life of early Springfield, and the early appearance of Abraham Lincoln.

Conkling was a politician of some local prominence, being elected mayor of Springfield in 1844 and to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1851. Like Lincoln, Conkling became a Republican. He campaigned for Lincoln in Pennsylvania in 1860. When Lincoln became President, Conkling occasionally visited Washington as agent to handle Federal accounts for the State of Illinois. In 1862, he used his friendship with the President as an avenue to press for the selection of Mackinaw City rather than Michilimackinaw as a spot to be fortified for the protection of the Great Lakes. Conkling cited a number of arguments about the relative military advantages of the two sites, but he also admitted that he had invested some \$18,000 in Mackinaw City over the previous five years.

Students of Lincoln's Presidency know Conkling principally for his invitation to Lincoln to speak at a mass rally in Illinois on September 3, 1863. Conkling hoped that Lincoln would make a personal appearance, but from the start Lincoln leaned towards sending a letter to be read at the rally. Conkling, whom Lincoln thought "one of the best public readers" he knew, read the famous letter at the rally. Lincoln had cautioned him: "Read it very slowly." The letter defended the administration's policies of emancipation and arming Negroes as the best ways militarily to save the Union. Conkling was an ardent antislavery man, and he complimented the letter and hoped for the day when military success would leave "no question as to the condition and rights of 'American citizens of African descent.'"

Conkling wanted to visit Europe, and, in the summer of 1864, he pressed Lincoln for a European appointment. The President gave Conkling an introduction to Secretary of State William H. Seward, but nothing came of it. Conkling nevertheless continued to work hard for Lincoln's reelection and spurned the third-party movements which lured some other antislavery liberals away from Lincoln's camp. When Lincoln won reelection, Conkling pressed again for a European appointment, but the result was the same as in the previous summer.

There is no doubt of Lincoln's close personal relationship with Conkling. He referred to him at various times during the Civil War as "entirely trustworthy," as "my personal friend of long standing," as "a good man," and as "a particular friend & fellow townsman." Yet the Conkling presentation copy of the *Debates* is not autographed by Lincoln. Harry Pratt missed the Conkling copy, but he did note two similar unsigned presentation copies. John H. Littlefield, once a student in the Lincoln-Herndon law office, wrote in his copy: "J.H. Littlefield From A. Lincoln, April 25, 1860." And Charles J. Sellon, an Illinois newspaper editor, wrote in his: "Chas. J. Sellon Presented by Hon A. Lincoln." The inscription in the Chicago Historical Society copy is in Conkling's hand. It is written in ink; Lincoln wrote in ink in only one of the nineteen known copies he signed. It is dated; Lincoln dated only one of the copies he signed. The early April date would be approximately the time Lincoln first received his one hundred copies of the book from the publisher, and Lincoln was in Springfield on April 7th. Like Littlefield and Sellon, James Conkling failed to have Lincoln sign his copy of this famous book.

